

Bang Chan Canal bisected

the community and joined, about one mile south, Sānsāeb Canal, a broad old waterway connecting Bangkok and Mīnburi with the canal network of the central plains. A well-raised, year-round road which ran between Bangkok, 20 miles to the southwest, and Mīnburi, two miles east, cut through one side of the area. On it lay Bang Khūat, another community, about eight kilometers from Bang Chan (cf. Kaufman:1960), and a cluster of houses called "Kilō pēt," (Kilō 8) both west of Bang Chan and nearer to Bangkok. A shallow canal flanked this road most of the way.

The town of Mīnburi with district offices, shops, and pharmacists, and a good-sized Muslim population was well-known to most of the residents of Bang Chan. Its middle school drew from the surrounding farming countryside, including Bang Chan, those few pupils whose educational aspirations led them beyond the local elementary school. Mīnburi had electricity, but no telephone or telegraph facilities.

For nine months of the year, while Bang Chan lay under water, most of the marketing was done through boat-vendors who plied the canals. During the dry months, or for large festivities, people marketed at Mīnburi, Kilō pēt, or in Bangkok.

The Thai government administered Bang Chan through two district offices (amphoe), one located in Mīnburi, the other in Bangkok, close to Bangkok. The common boundary of their respective districts happened to run through the middle of the community. Seven local head men, each in charge of one of the seven hamlets (muban) into which the entire community was divided reported to one or the other district office. They transmitted instructions from their superiors to the farmers, maintained order mostly by their personal prestige, and kept the village census more or less up to date by recording and reporting marriages, births, and deaths.

At the center of the community was the cherished Buddhist temple with its abbot, monks, and novices, numbering 15 to 50 depending on the season. The elementary public school, occupying one of its buildings,¹ was attended by 300 children aged eight to fifteen, both Buddhist and Muslim. The temple compound was surrounded by a number of houses, including a cafe and stalls for small vendors. A small country mosque (surao) in another hamlet was the religious center for the Muslim minority, some of whose children attended another school just outside the Bang Chan community. The abbot and the imam, the respective local heads of the two religious faiths, were of importance in the community as leaders.

1. A new large school has since been built away from the temple compound.

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132 Bangkok. The tropical monsoon climate divides the year into three seasons, a hot, wet season from late May to November, a cooler, dry season from December to early February, and a hot, dry season from late February to mid-May. The community, scattered over an area of approximately five square miles, was composed of seven neighboring hamlets. In 1954, the population was approximately 1700, divided among 336 households. About 60 per cent of the households were made up of independent families, parents with unmarried children, with an average family size of 5.7 persons. The main occupation of 80 per cent of all families was rice farming.

243 The climate together with the overflowing Chao Phraya
[13] river, provided natural conditions for raising a single crop of wet rice. From May or June to February, the principal activities were those connected with rice production. This crop greatly exceeded the needs for local consumption as human food, feed, and seed. The surplus of rice which was sold, was estimated for 1953 as 1.4 times the amount used for all purposes within the village (Janlekha, 1955).

• 346 Wat Bang Chan, the Buddhist monastery and place for religious exercises, was also the center of social life in the community. When data for this study were being gathered, the one primary school in the village was located on the grounds of the wat. The community was defined simply by the clientele which patronized Wat Bang Chan and this elementary school.
[563] Within the area of the community lived a small minority of Thai Moslems who patronized a mosque and school just outside Bang Chan. The few Chinese in the village were considered as part of the Thai-Buddhist community. Information to be presented on food habits refers primarily to habits of the Buddhist majority, although some reference will be made to ways in which Moslem practices differed therefrom.

193 Although for six or more months of the year the fields
243 were covered with water, sometimes to a depth of a meter or more, a year-round road, connecting Bangkok and Minburi, the nearest market town, ran through one edge of the village. Bus service was available along this road, to either Bangkok or Minburi but within the community one went by boat on the network of canals during the wet season, and during the dry season, on foot along the dikes or across fields. From late January through May, when subsidiary canals were apt to be dry, getting about was somewhat difficult. Boat travel was considered easy, but as many families had only one boat, a trip to the store or even to a neighbor's home had to be planned with reference to the activities of other family members.

443 Large scale purchases, as for a ceremony, were always made at a big market, but in general, instead of people going to the market-town, the "market" came to the people. Boat-vendors brought not only fresh produce and staples but also sweets, loas, soft drinks, and cooked foods such as Chinese

the priests had finished¹. The trays of food from which each guest served himself were bountiful, but it was not proper to eat very heartily, lest the host suffer the shame of running out of food. If there were a dramatic show or movie at night it was open to the public. In one case 2000 people attended. At that time eight commercial vendors turned up to sell coffee, soft drinks, ices and other foods. Vendors came to every large ceremony, and were heavily patronized. At the end of a (1)ngaan, the sponsors felt satisfaction and security. Where there was plenty of food to take home, the success was even greater. An earthy compliment was, "the fields were full of feces."

In addition to the banquet were ceremonial offerings of food to spirits and ritual food sometimes consumed as a sacrament. For each ceremony, appropriate selections were made from a specific list: a cooked pig's head, or at least a slice of cooked pork; two kinds of sweetmeats, red ((2)kha-(5)nom (3)tom (1)daeseng) and white ((2)kha-(5)nom (3)tom (5)khaaw); a cooked fish, usually (1)plaa (3)chaaun, with its head and tail; a green coconut with its coconut water; a bunch of bananas either of the (3)kluaaj (4)nam-(4)waa or (3)kluaaj (4)nam varieties; a hard-boiled egg, usually duck; and liquor.² Other kinds of sweets, fruit, sugar cane, items for betel chewing, chicken, salt, and rice might appear. As these ceremonies were thought to be auspicious, purifying, therapeutic and protective, they were most elaborate at the great (1)tham-(1)khwan (soul-strengthening) ceremony, at house-raising and at rites to local guardian spirits. The necessity of these ceremonies explains why when public structures were raised, a portion of the public funds were used for a repast. In Bang Chan when donations for a new school

1. Other priorities in service might be observed; for example, at a celebration preceding ordination the priest-candidates were served next. At one small affair, when 11 priests came to a home to conduct a service for a disabled old man who could not go to the temple, this elder was served after the priests, then the research group who counted as visiting dignitaries, and finally the other family members, with the women who prepared the food, and the children, eating last. The general sequence prescribed by etiquette was: priests should be served before anyone else, old before the young, the males before females, persons with high status such as teachers and ceremonialists before low, urban before rural. Those who cooked and served came last of all. When the number of participants was large, guests might be served, as they arrived, over a period of hours.

2. The presence of meat, fish and alcohol in this ceremonial food reflected non-Buddhist elements in Thai culture, and should not be viewed as a gross violation of Buddhist precepts.

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In Bang Chan when donations for a new school building warranted buying the foundation materials, so that volunteer labor was solicited for their installation, some of the money went into food, despite additional donations of food. This was in no way misappropriation. Helping to cook was as important as helping to dig the holes.

The spirit-offering, or the portions eaten by a participant as a sacrament, were actually tiny bits of each food. Afterward, the entire lay-out, pork, sweetmeats and all, was eaten. Because all this was holy food, it was felt to be especially strengthening, so was usually given to children, but might be eaten by family members and occasionally, priests. The pork was cut up and eaten with a hot sauce, or put into a "with-rice" dish. It was especially appropriate with liquor.

The use of food ritually was not limited to the ceremonial season nor to big events. The same purposes underlay the use of a hard-boiled egg eaten in the ceremony that was designed to restore a child "sick from temporary loss of its soul," and in another performed in order to wean a baby.

The benefits of a (l)ngaan accrued to every participant down to the last worker and contributor according to the degree of assistance. With status in this and in later lives at stake, no one hesitated to plunge into debt or even to sell land. For the sake of economy two different ceremonies might be performed on the same day, for example a child's topknot cutting at a daughter's wedding.¹ The saving was in time and expense for food preparation, but such multiple ceremonies were performed less often than one might expect.

One assistance in the financing was that every invited guest made a contribution, customarily 5 to 10 baht, which helped defray the costs. In 1952, household heads reported these contributions as totalling from 30 to 1,000 baht, with an average of 343 for the year (Janlekha, 1955). Of 96 household heads who provided information on special expenses during the 5-year period March, 1948 through February, 1953, 36 had given (l)ngaan with net expenditures (costs minus contributions) ranging from -10² to 15,000 baht. The average net cost was 4,361 baht (Janlekha, 1955). These figures might represent a single (l)ngaan or several events.

1. Every desired ritual could be carried out at little cost. Thus a priest-candidate whose father was dead, was included in the pre-ordination festivities planned for a friend; and on one occasion five bodies were cremated at the same ceremony, which was sponsored by the kin of one of the deceased.

2. The -10 meant that contributions exceeded the cost.